

There has been a gulf between artist and architect since the Renaissance – and there are still no permanent bridges

Uneasy partners

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THERE IS a sad no man's land at the heart of contemporary visual culture in which artists and architects warily circle each other, not sure whether to fall on each other's necks as long lost siblings — urged on by the more sentimental of critics — or to expect a knife in the ribs for their pains. The truth is that for all the pious rhetoric from those who claim to see the discovery of common ground between art and architecture as offering the best hope for producing buildings that seduce rather than alienate their audience, the two sides are locked in a particularly vicious turf war. Not always tacitly, they regard each other as at best necessary evils, and perceive their respective interests as implacably opposed.

As artists see it, architects command huge budgets and shape vast swathes of our cities with absolutely no aesthetic content, and then attempt to camouflage the worst of the damage with a few insultingly trivial gestures toward art confined inevitably to the lobby or the plaza like some kind of trophy. More often than not even this gesture will involve the work of that dispiritingly limited number of artists with whom architects are familiar. The essential characteristic of this group seems to be willingness to turn their art into inoffensive decoration and to pose no intellectual challenge.

Architects, on the other hand, see their room for manoeuvre in the contemporary climate limited to the point of claustrophobia. As such even the most generously inclined see no point in allowing art a dominant role in those few areas where the architect does retain aesthetic control. It also has to be said that the more successful the architecture, the less that art appears to have a role to play. Take the Lloyd's building, a work of sculpture so powerful that any attempt at applied art is hardly relevant.

The fruitless tension between art and architecture goes back at least to the days of Ruskin. Before that the egotism of artist and architect was more often than not subsumed into a single individual. Michelangelo, for example, could turn his mind to designing a dome as well as painting the frescoes inside it. But in the 19th century, the machine age was blamed for reducing the art that encrusted interiors and exteriors into a lifeless travesty. The response of the 20th century was to strip everything away. Mod-

ernists made architecture itself the primary art work. Pure abstracted space leaves no role for applied art. Artists retreated into the museum, pursuing a discourse that diverged more and more sharply from architecture. And yet this difficult no man's land has recently started to become more and more crowded with architects who produce what could be taken at first sight as being closer to art than building. The most prominent architects of the current crop, such as Zaha Hadid, responsible for the new Cardiff opera house, Frank Gehry in Los Angeles and Danny Liebskin in Berlin, certainly produce drawings that look much more like art than architecture. Hadid's fa-



Armajani's Sacco and Vanzetti reading room — at the Ikon Gallery

voiced means of expression is painting on canvas in a spatially explosive constructivist style. Gehry has a lot in common, with his weakness for including giant fish as arbitrary elements in his buildings with the work of a pop sculptor like Oldenburg.

At the same time, there are more and more artists who are working at least with architecture as subject matter. There is Anthony Caro, whose sculpture has grown in scale and has begun to resemble building. And both the late Donald Judd and Frank Stella have actually sought to work as architects, producing usable buildings working to briefs for specific sites.

There is another impulse at work also quite different in its intentions. It is seen most clearly in the late architect Theo Crosby's painful attempts to

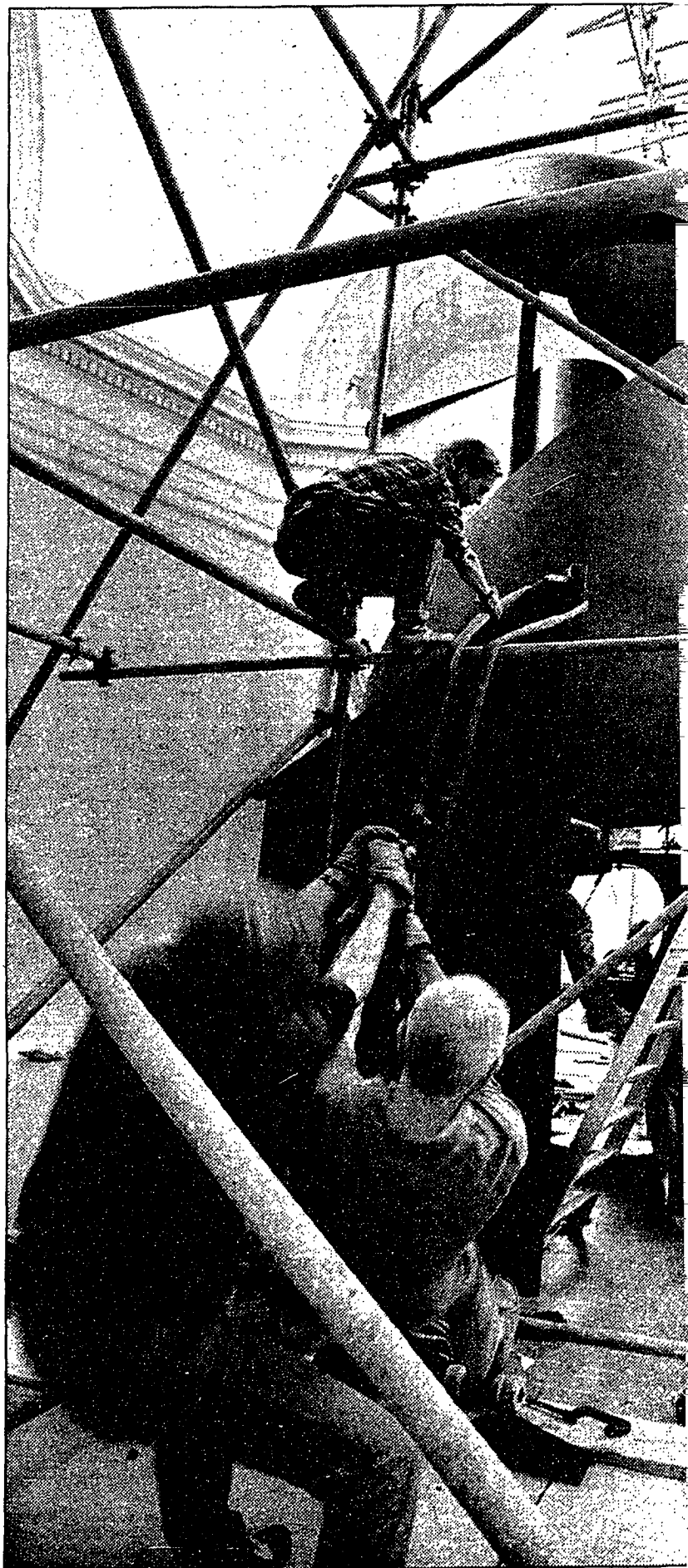
give the friendless Barbican arts centre in London the character of an Edwardian lyric theatre by decorating the grim concrete exterior with a series of what might be termed easy listening representational sculpture.

Rather more promising than this relegation of art to the role of camouflage is the work of the American-based artist Siah Armajani who currently is the subject of an exhibition at the Ikon gallery in Birmingham. Armajani is interested not just in working with the vocabulary of construction and space-making but has also become directly involved with a series of large-scale architectural projects.

Armajani is obsessed with bridges, the product perhaps of living in the twin city of Minneapolis/St Paul, divided by the Mississippi, where bridges are a constant part of the urban landscape. To Armajani the present confluence between art and architecture is accidental. The two sides may produce work that superficially looks similar but it means very different things, he says. Nevertheless it was Armajani who worked on the giant Battery Park City — New York's answer to Canary Wharf — and did as much as anybody could to soften the banality of the sheer bulk of its curtain-walled financial factories. Armajani's interventions ranged from inscribing Walt Whitman verses in the cast-iron railings that protect the site from the River Hudson to what are more clearly pieces of sculpture. He went on to collaborate with the architect Cesar Pelli on a major skyscraper for San Francisco, sadly so far unbuilt. Armajani gave the tower a top that looked like a streamlined version of the Tatlin tower. It would have been the most conspicuous piece of co-operation between art and architecture since the Viennese secession.

Armajani is now working on a large-scale project for the Olympics in Atlanta that involves a tower, a bridge and a plinth for the Olympic flame. But he is still operating in the no man's land of art and architecture. It may be more crowded than it once was but it is still unlikely ever to offer easy solutions to the integration of two very different kinds of visual culture. For Armajani himself the danger is that as far as the architectural world is concerned he becomes known as the bridge man doomed to go on repeating his trademark in the carefully circumscribed spaces left to him by the architect.

The Armajani exhibition is at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (021-643 0708).



Art into architecture . . . Caro's Octagon Tower of 1991